

**Cristobal Balenciaga: The Legend of Fashion's
Last Haute Couturier Revealed**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis:

This study of late couture designer Cristobal Balenciaga consists of a compilation of bibliographic research that reflects on and explains Balenciaga's design philosophy and how it influenced his career. It is followed by a series of eight pencil and charcoal sketches that trace Balenciaga's development as a designer and craftsman from the late 1930s through the 1960s. The final three photographs feature the culmination of this project. I designed and constructed an evening dress based on actual garments and using similar dressmaking techniques that earned Balenciaga the title of "The Master."

The written section of this project was researched in the summer of 1994 at the New York Public Library, Manhattan Branch, and by studying New York Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibits.

The dress is a fully lined sleeveless bias cowl neck cocktail dress with shoulder tucks, a V-back and a chiffon bow at the back waist. It was constructed using the draping pattern making technique.

To understand Cristobal Balenciaga, one needs only to study his designs. Using minimal ornamentation, his garments were simple, impeccably cut and completely harmonious in line and shape. In addition, the influence of his Spanish heritage is evident in the lace, tiers and flounces so common in Balenciaga evening gowns. Balenciaga was a designer dedicated not only to the art of design, but to his small staff of employees and to the country whose rich culture influenced the fabrics, colors and details of his garments.

Born and raised in a small Spanish fishing village, Balenciaga was a reserved and elusive man. Renown by the world for the brilliance of his designs, he was only known by a few close friends. He hid behind the walls of his Paris design house at no. 10 Avenue George V, perfecting his craft in the seclusion of the world he created. Known to other fashion designers and fashion journalists as the Master, the King, the Mystery Man, the Elusive Prince and the Garbo of Fashion, Balenciaga refused to be photographed or interviewed. Instead, he took refuge behind his legend. He disdained the notion of being a celebrity, insisting he was merely a craftsman. Through his designs, he attempted to shift attention to the women he clothed. Balenciaga's garments were designed to flatter almost any female form, creating slenderness, height and graceful movement even where there was none. He designed for a select few loyal clients who almost came to worship the man who could transform the frumpiest dowager into an elegant noble through his magical designs.

Balenciaga was born January 21, 1895 in Guetaria, Spain. He lived a humble life with his mother and two siblings. His father, a sailor and mayor of the village, died at an early age. To support her family, Balenciaga's mother became a seamstress and taught dressmaking to village girls. She was young Cristobal's first inspiration. His ultimate inspiration was the Marquesa de Casa Torres, who he met by chance in the street at the age of 13. As legend has it, the Marquesa, charmed by the boy's

admiration of her beautiful gown, allowed him to make a copy of it for her personal wardrobe. This acquaintance with the Marquesa gave him access to a world of elegance and sophistication unattainable in Guetaria.

Balenciaga soon after became a tailor's apprentice in San Sebastian, Spain, and in 1913, landed his first dressmaking job. By 1919, he opened his first design house in San Sebastian. San Sebastian was a fashionable resort where the Spanish royal family often vacationed. Subsequently, Balenciaga's first commission was a wedding gown designed for a royal wedding, giving him the opportunity to meet Queen Victoria Eugenia and the Queen Mother Maria Cristina. So impressed they were with his dresses, both became clients of this young, unknown designer. This was the launching point of Balenciaga's fame.

Balenciaga continued designing in San Sebastian until 1933, when he moved his design house to Madrid. In 1935, he opened another house in Barcelona. He operated both until the outbreak of the Spanish civil war. It was at this time Balenciaga became a patron of Parisian designers such as Worth, Lanvin, Cheriut (whose work he especially admired), Molyneux, Paquin, Lelong and Augustabernard. He was also fascinated by Madeline Vionnet and her signature bias cuts, Coco Chanel and Elsa Schiaparelli. Due to political unrest in Spain, and his fondness for Parisian fashion, Balenciaga moved to Paris and opened his house at no. 10 Avenue George V in 1937.

Balenciaga staged his first Paris fashion show in August 1937, causing little furor with the fashion press, other than to comment that his designs were "noteworthy, full of good taste and originality." (Jouve 1989) However, commercially speaking, Balenciaga was wildly successful, selling a record number of 52 dresses in August. Word of this new designer spread quickly, and by March 1938, his client list included the Duchess of Westminster and actress Madeline Lambert. In August 1938, major retailers like Bloomingdales, Saks Fifth Avenue and Bendel

were placing orders for Balenciaga's discreet day wear and sumptuous evening gowns.

This "Era of the Infantas", as the elegance of European society was known in the late 1930s before the onset of World War II, only lasted a few years. From July to September 1940, Balenciaga was forced to shut his Paris doors as a result of the war. He reopened in October, one of about 60 design houses to carry on despite the war. He showed small collections to a limited number of clients. Shortages of resources were evident in the collections of this period. Formal evening gowns disappeared. They were replaced with more practical outfits such as the bicycling outfit he created in 1941, consisting of a short skirt, blazer, wool stockings and bloomers. Most of Balenciaga's designs from 1940-44 reflected the hard times during the war. Gathers and flares common in day wear were used extensively. Black, always one of Balenciaga's signature colors, was dominant throughout these years. In addition, synthetic fibers began to appear in his work. He used more embroidery and trimmings than at any other time in his work to compensate for the lack of fine fabric. The austere designs lacked frills and flounces, yet conveyed beauty and strength in their simplicity.

The period after the war was a time of joy and liberation. The lifestyle of the Infantas returned, as did the availability of fine fabrics. Extreme fashion changes were on the horizon as well. New fabrics such as nylon took the world by storm, as well as a radical silhouette change, introduced by designer Christian Dior, called the "New Look." The New Look silhouette featured cinched, emphasized waists, full, accentuated hips and bust lines, and long limbs. Earlier fashions, such as Balenciaga's, typically hid these areas in an attempt to compensate for the shortfalls of the average figure. The New Look was in complete opposition to Balenciaga's work and design philosophy. He was against rapid changes in fashion and believed that fashions that could not work on ordinary bodies (as New Look designs often

could not) were worthless.

This began a time period of conflicting fashion trends. Dior's New Look, loved by the press, was at one end of the spectrum, while Balenciaga held fast to his "Barrel Line", which was embraced by his clients. In 1951, Balenciaga showed a semi-fitted line that deviated completely from the New Look. His styles flattered his clients who were older women with less than ideal shapes. In 1955, the first evidence of Oriental influence on Balenciaga appeared in his tunic dress. It reappeared in 1957's infamous sack dress and in 1959 in his empire waists and kimono sleeves. Because Balenciaga remained loyal to his clientele and served their needs rather than caving into fashion trends, many of his signature pieces during the 1950s (most notably the sack dress) received criticism from the fashion press. As a result he banned many journalists from his shows from 1956-61. Despite the unflattering press, Balenciaga designs were as prized as ever by his clients and in great demand. He was the only designer of the 1950s to successfully challenge Dior's New Look.

Although Balenciaga's collections were attractive and well received by the public, the early 1960s marked the beginning of Balenciaga's decline. In February 1961, fashion journalist Eugenia Shepard was the first person to openly question the inventiveness of Balenciaga's designs. Shepard described the 1960s as "BC" and "AC," (meaning "Before Courreges" and "After Courreges" in reference to Andre Courreges, a former Balenciaga staff designer now designing under his own name.) The dividing line was 1965. Until then Balenciaga had great influence. He brought boots to couture, introduced waterproof suits and reinvented the sari. However when hot new designers, such as Yves Saint Laurent, appeared on the fashion scene and pop music became the new inspiration, Balenciaga turned his back to it. Pret a porter, or ready to wear, clothing was the direction fashion was heading. As a well known haute couture designer, Balenciaga could have made a fortune launching

pret a porter lines. But when approached by hopeful business partners, Balenciaga vehemently refused, stating, "I shall never prostitute my art." (Jouve 1989) While designers such as Dior, Saint Laurent and Courreges licensed their designs and built empires by banking their names, Balenciaga continued his business as usual. Every garment bearing the Balenciaga name had been touched by the Master himself.

In 1965, Courreges introduced a collection that helped launch the mini skirt and the youth look. Balenciaga was the only designer to lengthen hemlines that year. Although in 1967, Balenciaga introduced a few mini lengths, the collections were not well received in general and the number of buyers for the pieces was falling. In 1968, the House of Balenciaga closed its doors forever.

Catherine Lardeur, reporting for *Jardins des Modes*, said of Balenciaga at the end of the 1960s:

"He stood apart, completely apart. He had been king for years and his kingdom gradually dwindled. It could not be said his clothes were lacking in anything, but fashion is more than a simple question of clothes. Fashion is a certain way of moving, walking and thinking -- a way of being. The women of the sixties wanted to move a different way." (Jouve 1989)

Balenciaga came out of retirement for a final commission in 1972. This last creation, like his first commission in 1919, was a royal wedding gown. The design was created as a favor for a former client's daughter, the Duquesa de Cadiz. Shortly after, on March 24, 1972, Balenciaga died.

Balenciaga's almost 60 year career in fashion was marked by major world events, personal triumphs and tragedies, and professional conflicts. He dealt with each challenge in his unique way and maintained his dignity and integrity even in the face of defeat. Although some of his greatest creations were scoffed at by the

media when Balenciaga unveiled them, the world of fashion has now come to appreciate the brilliance and beauty Cristobal Balenciaga offered. When he died, the last vestige of true haute couture died with him.

Description of Illustrations

1. Infantas dress in ivory satin and black velvet applique trim. 1939.
2. Black lace dress. 1939.
3. Black crepe sheath dress accented with satin trim and bow. September 1940.
4. Pleated silk dress with detachable collar. Spring 1948.
5. Red taffeta bow on embroidered tulle sheath dress. May 1950.
6. Sack dress with six pleats at shoulders in black raw silk. 1958.
7. Sleeve cape in black faille with strapless sheath dress in tea rose crepe.
Summer 1961.
8. Four-sided dress in black gazar with short narrowly tapered skirt and jeweled straps. 1967.

Credits: Sketches 1-5 and 7-8 from photographs in Jouve's biography. Sketch 6 from Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibit 1994.

Description of Photographs

Bias cowl neck cocktail dress in black polyester crepe. Fully lined. Five tucks at each shoulder. V-back secured at back waist with 14 mini tucks and large black chiffon bow. Designed and constructed Fall 1994.

1. Left side front view
2. Full front view
3. Back view

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Jane



Sara



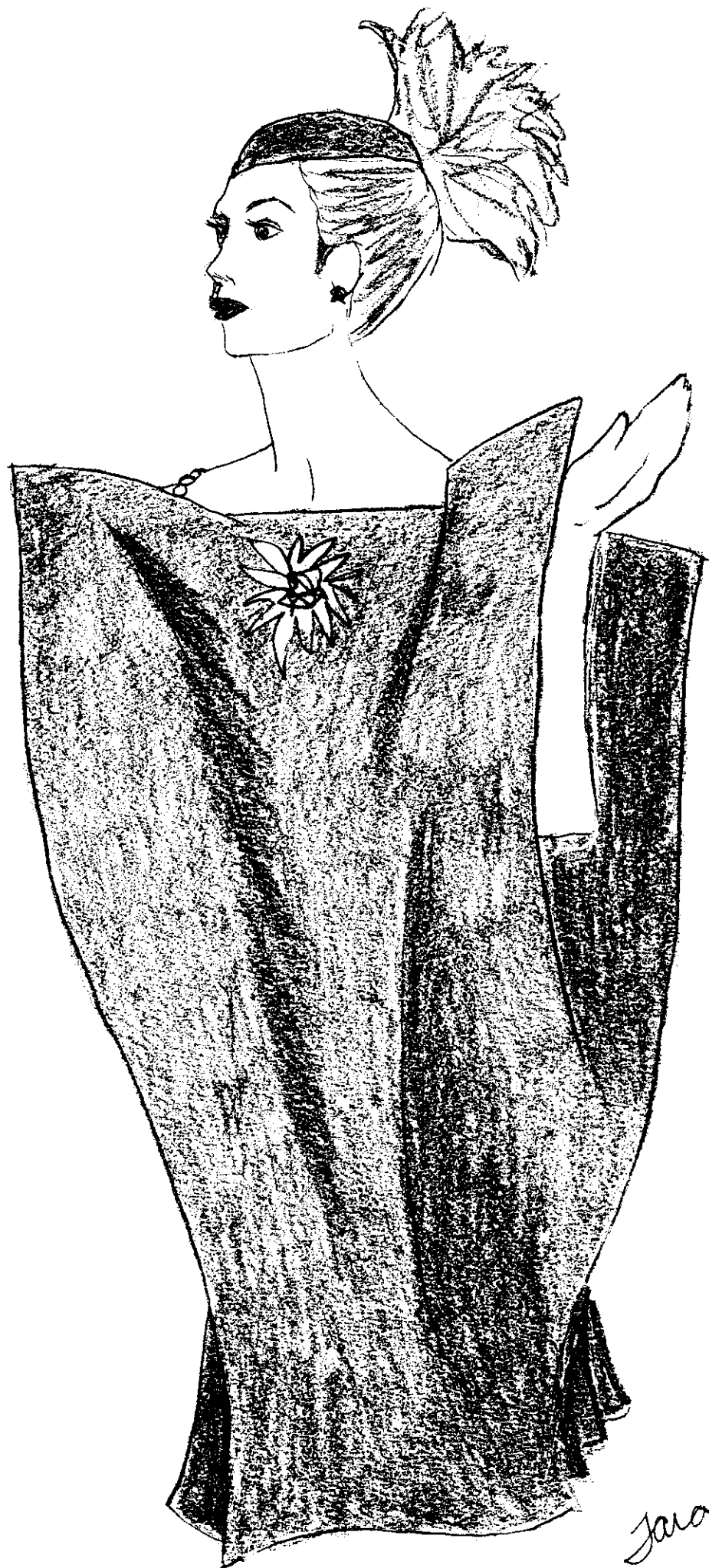






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